

Radiologists accused in "scan scam"

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists has defended itself against allegations that its members in Australia backdated and falsified contracts for magnetic resonance imaging machines after hearing of a potentially profitable budget leak.

In what has become a bitter political scandal, the Australian parliament has been told that radiologists, who helped to negotiate a new health insurance rebate for scanners, ordered a new batch of the machines after somehow learning of the budget measure.

But the college said that the possibility of the changes were widely known within the profession for some time, that there was a genuine need for more machines to reduce waiting times for scans, and that to its knowledge there had been no wrongdoing.

Under the changes, which were meant to be secret until Budget night on 12 May 1998, the magnetic resonance imaging machines could each qualify for rebates of up to \$A1.6m (£627 000) a year.

The budget was to fund 400 000 scans over three years, under the publicly funded Medicare scheme, and give a rebate of about \$A500 per patient, but only for existing machines or those under order.

According to figures given in parliament, during 1987 to 1997, radiologists bought 59 of the machines, which can cost up to \$A3m. But between 10 February and 12 May last year, 39 machines were purchased. After the budget, 13 more were bought, with radiologists claiming that they were ordered before 12 May.

The first talks between the government and the college canvassing the proposed changes were held on 10 February 1998.

The Labor party opposition has been calling for the resignation of the health minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge, claiming the accusations are the "biggest scam in living memory" against the federal government.

Dr Wooldridge has denied that he leaked any of the information but admitted that it could have come from at least four government departments as the result of an administrative error. He has announced a series of inquiries into the scandal, which has become known as the "scan scam."

"I have no doubt the majority of radiologists are honourable and honest," he told parliament.



The glasses worn by these Tunisian girls are second hand glasses from the United States, which were collected, cleaned, repaired, and delivered by a US charity, Gift of Sight. Thousands of volunteers from Lions Clubs International and LensCrafters, a commercial firm, are collecting spectacles at Hallowe'en on Sunday so that Gift of Sight can deliver them to people in developing countries.

"It would appear, however, that a significant number have behaved in a manner which can only be described as a scam."

The president of the college, Professor John Earwaker said that prior knowledge of the budgetary change was well known. "There was widespread anticipation within the profession at large that there would be some sort of funding for magnetic resonance imaging," he said.

"In the course of negotiations with the department, regular bulletins were issued to fellows so that they were aware that negotiations were proceeding."

The government's auditor general and the Health Insurance Commission are both conducting investigations. Twenty nine contracts have been examined, 16 of which have been or will be referred to the federal director of public prosecutions. □

US research scientist found guilty of fraud

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

A scientist who produced key research papers on the possible biological effects of low intensity electromagnetic fields has been found to have intentionally falsified and fabricated data.

The US Office of Research Integrity's verdict on Dr Robert Liburdy comes in the wake of similar conclusions by a committee at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, where he worked.

The office says that Dr Liburdy, a biochemist who received around \$6m (£3.75m) in federal research grants over the past decade, neither admits nor denies its findings of scien-

tific misconduct in biomedical research.

The findings centre on papers published by Dr Liburdy in 1992, one of them in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (1992;649:74-95).

The papers reported data indicating that electromagnetic fields like those emitted by overhead power lines exerted a biological effect by altering the entry of calcium across a cell's surface membrane. The results suggested a pathway by which these fields might affect cells and possibly damage health.

The office points out that the papers came at a time when

there was public concern about possible links between health and electromagnetic fields from power lines, home wiring, and electrical appliances of all kinds.

"Dr Liburdy's claims were potentially very important when published in 1992 because they purported to link electromagnetic fields and calcium signalling, a fundamental cell process governing many important cellular function," said the office's report on its findings.

The report says that Dr Liburdy selected only the data points that supported his theory, misrepresented experimental methods, falsified or fabricated data, misled his own experts, and lied to investigators from the Office of Research Integrity.

"Dr Liburdy's conduct reflects a sustained pattern of deception over a period of several years in the conduct of

research and serves to demonstrate the data falsifications and fabrications were intentional and not the result of honest error," it says.

The office said that the researcher has entered into a "voluntary exclusion" agreement with the agency that will bar him from seeking federal grants for three years. It also required him to write letter to the journals concerned withdrawing some of the data.

In addition he is excluded from acting as an adviser to the Public Health Service. "Dr Liburdy has entered into the agreement. As part of the agreement he neither admits nor denies the [Office of Research Integrity's] finding of scientific misconduct," says the report.

Since 1993 the office has given 102 findings of scientific misconduct, including 12 so far this year. □